

## A LOOK BACK

# Diary of a Cadet on the Warship *La Flore* – 1872

Pierre Loti

Translated from the French by Ann M. Altman, Ph.D.

### EASTER ISLAND

In the middle of the Pacific Ocean, where sailors never go, there is an isolated and mysterious island; there are no other islands nearby and the island is surrounded by vast and empty rolling seas for more than eight hundred leagues<sup>1</sup> in every direction. The island is planted with monstrous tall statues, carved by an unknown race of people that has either disappeared or dispersed, and its history remains an enigma.

I arrived there by a three-masted frigate long ago, in my early youth, after days of high winds and murky clouds. All that remains to me now is the memory of a wondrous dreamlike island.

As a naval cadet, I kept a daily record of my experiences in a somewhat confused and childish diary. This account is a modified version of that diary, to which I have tried to add some details that were missing.

#### January 3

At eight o'clock in the morning, the lookout sighted land and I caught my first glimpse of the silhouette of Easter Island, to the Northeast. The island was still far away and we did not reach it until evening in spite of the favorable trade winds.

Several days previously, we had abandoned the standard sea lanes that ships follow across the Pacific in order to sail to the island, which is on nobody's route to anywhere. It was discovered by chance and the few navigators who had, on very rare occasions, visited the island, told contradictory stories about it.

The islanders, whose origins are shrouded in perplexing mystery, are dying out little by little, for unknown reasons, and there remain, we were told, only a few dozen starving and timorous savages who survive on a diet of roots. In the midst of the solitude of the seas, the island will soon find itself alone too, with the giant statues as its only guardians. There is nothing there, not even a spring from which to collect fresh water, and attempts to land there are hampered by breakers and numerous reefs.

We are going to the island to explore and to take away

with us, if possible, one of the ancient stone statues, which our admiral would like to bring back to France.

Slowly this strange island comes closer and we can see it more clearly; under a sky darkened by clouds, we see reddish craters and dark rocks. A great wind is blowing and the sea is covered with white spray.

Rapa Nui is the name by which the natives refer to Easter Island – and in the very sound of that name I hear echoes of sadness, savagery, and the darkness of night.... The darkness of time, the darkness of the island's origins or the darkness of the sky – it is unclear what kind of darkness is implied but it is clear that the black clouds, in whose shadows the island lies before us, reflect the darkness that captures my imagination.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, at four o'clock in the afternoon, in the shelter of the bay in which Cook dropped anchor so long ago, our frigate furls her sails and drops her anchors. Then canoes set sail from the shore and come towards us in the untamed wind.

Here comes a kind of whaling vessel, bringing us someone who looks like a European! The sight of a gentleman in a hat and overcoat, just as we are landing on Rapa Nui, is both disconcerting and disappointing.

The visitor comes on board: he is an old Dane,<sup>3</sup> and quite unexpected. Three years ago, he tells us, one of the Tahitian vessels that take mother of pearl and pearls to America made a detour of two hundred leagues to deposit him on the island. And, since that time, this old adventurer has been living alone, with the natives, as far from our world as someone who has chosen to live on the moon. An American planter had instructed him to acclimate yams and sweet potatoes to the island climate, with the aim of establishing huge plantations in the future. But nothing is going right, nothing is growing and the savages refuse to do any work. There are still three or four hundred of them, the old man tells us, gathered in the neighborhood of the very bay in which we dropped anchor, while the rest of the island is basically deserted. He, the Dane, lives in a stone house that he found on his arrival and whose roof he fixed; it used to be the home of the French missionaries. There had been missionaries on Rapa Nui for several years but they went away or died – it is unclear exactly what happened – leaving the people to return to the worship of fetishes and idols.

While the Dane and I are talking, I hear something jump onto the deck behind me. When I turn around, I see that one of the oarsmen from the Dane's boat, a young savage, had been impudent enough to jump on board our ship. Oh! What a startling thin face, with a small nose shaped like a falcon's beak and large, sad eyes that are too close together. He is naked, simultaneously slender and muscular; his skin is a coppery red and decorated with blue tattoos, and his hair, which is also red, is tied with plant stems on the top of his head to form a



Julien Viaud (Pierre Loti). Photo taken June 20, 1878 in Brest. © Rochefort-Maison de Pierre Loti.

topknot that the wind ruffles so that resembles a flame. He stares at us with bewildered eyes, with the charm of a crazy little devil.

"And the statues?" we ask our old Danish Crusoe.

The statues? There are two kinds. First, those at the beach, which have all been knocked over and broken; we shall find some of them nearby, around the bay. And then there are the others, the scary ones, from a different era and with different faces, which are still standing over there, far away, at the other end of the island, in the depths of undisturbed solitude.

The savage with the red topknot starts to feel more confident. Now he is dancing and singing to amuse us. He is one of the natives that the missionaries baptized and his name is Petero. The wind, which is getting stronger as dusk falls, carries off his melancholy song and blows his topknot around.

The other natives are afraid and do not want to come on board. However, their canoes surround us, rocked by their oars, the white capped waves and the spray. Pointing to their naked limbs, they make signs to indicate that they want clothes from the sailors in exchange for their paddles, their spears and their wooden and stone idols. The entire population has come to see us and all are naively overexcited by our arrival. However, the water in the bay is getting rougher and night is falling.

#### January 4

It is five o'clock in the morning and day is starting to break under thick gray clouds. A whaling boat, which has been assigned to me, is carrying me and two other cadets, friends of mine, who are as anxious as I am to set foot on this strange island. The admiral, who was amused by our impatience, has given each of us various tasks: to find a suitable channel and a site at which the crew can disembark; to look for the great statues; and to kill some rabbits for his dinner!

It is cold and dark. The wind is up and violent gusts throw handfuls of salty spray into our faces. To receive us this morning, the island has taken on a most fantastic appearance; the rocks and craters have a pale coppery tint against the dark gray background of the sky. And there is not a single tree anywhere - the island is as desolate as a desert.

Without too much trouble, we find a passage between the breakers, which are making sinister loud rumblings this morning. Once we have crossed the belt of reefs and reached calmer waters, we catch sight of Petero, our friend from the previous evening, who is standing on a rock and calling us. His shouts wake everyone else up and, in a flash, the entire shore is covered with savages. They come out from all over the place, from crevices in the rocks where they were sleeping and from huts that are so low that they seem incapable of accommodating human beings. From a distance, we had failed to notice these thatched huts but there they are, in large

numbers, lying flat on the ground, which is the same color as they are. When we have disembarked at the spot that Petero pointed out to us, all the men surround us, waving their lances with flint tips, their oars and their ancient idols in the half-light of the early morning. And the loud cold wind picks up, while the clouds seem to drag along the ground.

The whaling boat that has brought us to land returns to the frigate, as ordered by the captain. My two friends, who have guns, go off along the beach towards a place where there are rabbits, according to the Dane last night. I remain alone, watched from shorter and shorter distances by my new hosts. There are chests and faces colored blue with tattoos, long hair, strange smiles with white teeth, and sad eyes whose whites seem all the more brilliant because of the drawings in dark blue beneath them. In my light clothes,

which are wet from the salt spray, I begin to shiver from the cold and I note that daylight seems to be taking its time to emerge from under the thick clouds this morning....

The natives form a circle around me and each of them offers me his lance or his idol.

Now some of them

start to sing, quietly at first, a sort of plaintive and lugubrious chant, which they accompany by swaying their hips and shaking their heads like great dancing bears.... I know that they are harmless and, moreover, their faces, which on first impression appear fierce because of their tattoos, have a childlike sweetness. They do not make me feel afraid in any rational way; nevertheless, since I find myself for the first time in my life on an island in the Pacific Ocean, I do feel a shudder of surprise and instinctive fear with all these eyes upon me and all this breathing so close to me, before daybreak, on a deserted shore, under dark clouds....

Now the rhythm of the song is accelerating, as are the movements of the heads and hips; the voices are becoming hoarse and deep, turning into a loud and savage roar that leads into a furious dance accompanied by the wild wind and the noise of the sea. And then, suddenly, the singing and dancing cease. It's over. The circle opens up and the dancers disperse.... What did they all want from me? Was it some kind of childish demonstration on their part, or an exorcism, or was it just a warm welcome...? Who knows...?

An old man, covered with tattoos, who is wearing a headdress of long black feathers and who is probably some kind of chief, takes one of my hands and Petero takes the other. They run beside me, pulling me along, with the crowd behind us.

We stop in front of one of the many thatched dwellings that are flattened among the rocks and the sand, where they resemble the backs of sleeping animals. My escorts invite me to go inside and I have to get down on my hands and knees, wriggling like a cat going through a cat-door, because the entrance, at ground level and guarded by two granite divinities with sinister expressions, is a round hole that is barely

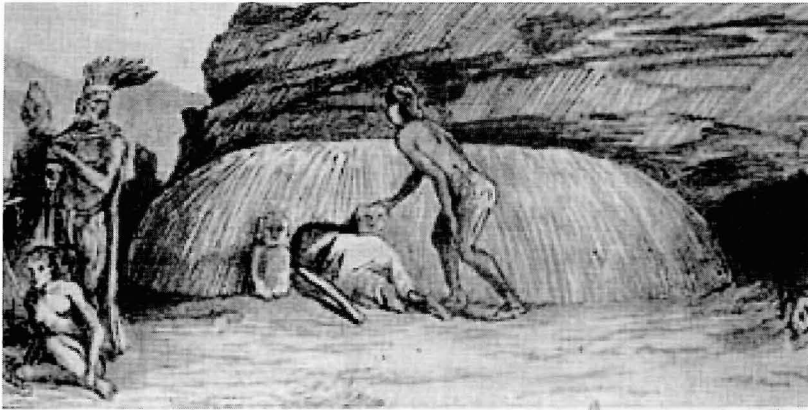


Drawing of a native canoe by Masselot from Dupetit-Thouars, 1846. From S. Chauvet 1934, Figure 18.

two feet high.

Inside the hut, which smells like an animal's den, it is impossible to see anything, in particular because of the crowd of people milling around and their shadows; of course, it is also impossible to stand up and, after the fresh and invigorating breeze outside, the air is barely breathable.

I am invited to sit down on mats beside the "chiefess"



Chief's house in 1872 according to Pierre Loti. A person is shown crawling through the doorway and into the house. Note small statues at the doorway and tattooed islanders. © Fonds Daniel Hervé, Maison de Pierre Loti, Rochefort.

and her daughter; they have no gifts for me and they apologize for the absence of gifts by making appropriate gestures. Now my eyes are getting used to the light inside the hut and I can see cats and rabbits moving around us.

During the course of the morning, I have to make many similar visits to placate all the important people on the island, and I crawl into innumerable darkened dwellings – where the crowd follows me and embraces me in a confusion of chests and hips, naked and tattooed. Little by little, I become impregnated with the odor of a wild man and a savage.

Everyone wants to give me an idol, a club or a spear in exchange for a piece of my clothing or something else that catches their fancy. Money obviously means nothing to them; it's best for decorating necklaces but glass pearls create a much handsomer effect.

Finally, it is well and truly daytime and, on all sides, the curtains of clouds disintegrate. Then the views change and the island, under a brighter light, seems more "real" and less sinister and, in any case, I am getting used to it.

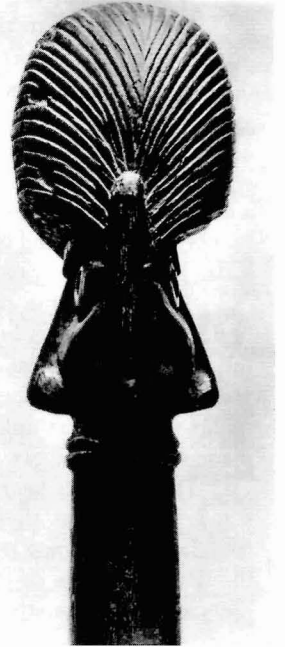
Already, to make some purchases, I have parted with the entire contents of my pockets: my handkerchief, some matches, a notebook and a pencil. I decide to give away my cadet's jacket in Janus head with a double human face – and so I continue my expedition in shirtsleeves.

I have obviously landed in the middle of a race of children. The young and the old cannot get enough of me. They want to watch me, listen to me, and follow me with all my various acquisitions, my idols and my weapons, all the while singing their plaintive dirges.

Indeed, when one thinks about it, what an event it must be for these people to have visitors like us on their isolated island, from which they see, on average, only a single sail every ten years or so on the infinity of sea that surrounds them!

In addition to my many escorts that hang back a little bit, I have also made five special friends: Petero, first of all; then two young boys, Atamou and Houga; and two girls, Marie and Iouaritaï.

Both Marie and Iouaritaï are completely naked apart from a belt that covers the bare essentials; their bodies would have been almost white, without any touch of sun or sea, were it not for the faint reflection of a coppery red, which is typical of the race. Their legs and thighs are covered with long blue tattoos, in strange patterns that have been exquisitely executed, no doubt to accentuate their charming slenderness. Marie was baptized as a child



Head of a *ua* (club). From S. Chauvet 1934, Figure 103b.

by the missionaries and it is quite disconcerting to find a girl on Easter Island called Marie. She has no particular beauty beyond her figure of a young goddess, her youth and her fine teeth, while Iouaritaï would be accepted as a beauty everywhere and in all countries, with her slender little nose and her large fearful eyes; she has pulled back her hair, which is artificially reddened, in the manner of the ancients and decorated it with blades of grass.

My God, how quickly time passes...! It is already half past ten and time for us to return to the ship for lunch. I can see, down below, crossing the belt of reefs, the whaling boat that is coming to collect us. My two friends return from their hunt, followed, as I am, by a group of singing escorts. They have killed many white seabirds, which they distribute among the women, but not a single rabbit. What poor quartermasters we are, all three of us...! And the great statues that I was supposed to find – I forgot about them completely...!

On board, we are welcomed back warmly nonetheless, and the officers are interested in all the things that I have brought to the ship with me. But I am very restless and, after midday, I return to the island and to my friends the savages.

The wind is still blowing. Such winds must be typical of Easter Island, given that it is located in the region where the austral trade winds blow most strongly. However, there remain only very few billowing fragments of the dark clouds of the early morning and a burning sun shines in a deep blue sky: we are very close to the tropics here.

When I arrive on shore, I can tell that everyone must be asleep, having a midday siesta, but my five friends, who are waiting for me out of politeness, are sitting on the rocks looking very sleepy.

I wouldn't mind sleeping for a few minutes but where might there be shade to lay my head on this island where



there are neither trees nor bushes?

After hesitating briefly, I go and ask the chief for hospitality and, crawling on all fours, I insinuate myself into his lodgings.

It is very warm there and a crowd of bodies is stretched out on the ground. Indeed, under the thatched shell, which has a volume approximately equivalent to that of a canoe turned upside down, the chief lives with his family, namely, his wife, two sons, a daughter, a son-in-law, a grandson, a large number of rabbits and chickens, and, finally, seven nasty, haughty cats with many kittens.

They settle me on a carpet made of braided reeds and, politely, all the people in the hut leave noiselessly and one by one to go and sleep elsewhere. Only Atamou remains with me, fanning me with a fly whisk made of black feathers, and I fall asleep.

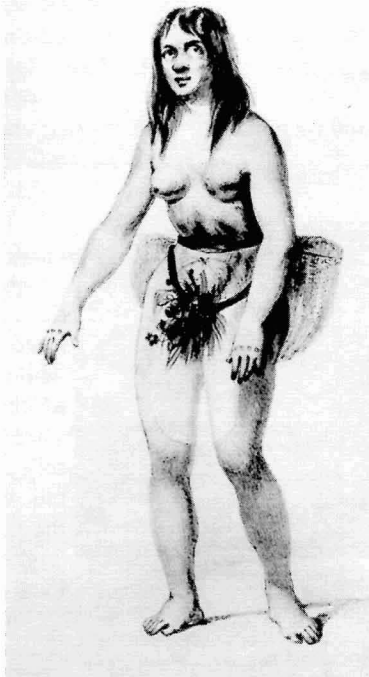
Half an hour later, when I regain consciousness, I am completely alone, surrounded by a silence that is broken only by the distant sounds of the sea on the coral reefs and, occasionally, by the noise of the reeds of the hut as they rustle in a gust of wind. Waking up in this miserable shelter, I feel a tremendous wave of homesickness.

I feel so far away, so very far away, and lost. And I am gripped too by that particular anxiety that is associated with the oppressive nature of islands in general, which no island in the world could induce more intensely than this one. Suddenly, the immensity of the ocean that surrounds me starts to upset me and the effect is almost physical.

From the corner in which I am sitting, a ray of sunshine seems to burst into the hut through the hole that serves as a door and, on the floor, I see the shadow of one of the idols that guards the door – and the bizarre shadows of two cats, with ears that are too long, who are sitting, day dreaming and looking outside the hut... Even the sunbeam and the bright light that it casts seem somehow strange, foreign and from “some earlier time”. In the light from the sunbeam, in this silence and tropical breeze, I am struck by an indescribable sadness as I awake: a sadness from the dawn of history perhaps, which might, by some confused error, have taken root here, on the island on which I find myself and which the unchanging and eternal sun overheats at this hour of every day.

Of course, this feeling passes quickly, disappearing like a child's mood, as soon as I become fully awake. And, without getting up, I amuse myself by examining the details of my shelter while mice, in spite of the two sentinel cats, scurry back and forth beside me.

The reed roof above my head is held up by the ribs of palm fronds – but where might these have come from since there are no trees on the island and there is no vegetation other than low shrubs and grasses. In my hut, which is barely one and a half meters high and four meters long, a thousand items are carefully attached to the walls: little idols made of black wood, which are wrapped in crude macramé; spears with flaked flint [sic] tips; paddles with human faces; feather headdresses; decorations for dance or battle; and many rather



Woman of Rapa Nui, drawn by Radiguet, from Dupetit-Thouars, 1841. S. Chauvet 1934, Figure 11.

perturbing tools or weapons, whose uses I cannot fathom and which all seem to be extremely old. Our earliest ancestors, when they dared to come out of their caves, must have built dwellings of this type, decorated with similar objects. I feel that I am among an infinitely primitive race, which is perhaps twenty or thirty thousand years less advanced than my own.

And now, as I start to think about it, I wonder where all this desiccated wood for these clubs and idols might have come from and when? And the cats? And the rabbits? I suppose the missionaries must have brought them to the island. But what about the mice that scamper around inside all the huts – nobody would have brought them, would they? So where did they come from? The smallest things, on this distant island, raise questions to which there are no answers; it is amazing that there is both a flora and a fauna here. The people living on Easter Island came from the west, from the Polynesian archipelagos; of that there is no doubt. First of all, the people say so themselves. According to the traditions passed on by their elders, they left the closest Oceanian island a

few centuries ago. The island is called Rapa and actually exists, with the same name, today. In honor of their very distant origins, they named their new home Rapa Nui (Great Rapa).

Even if we accept that the first settlers came from Rapa, the mystery of their departure from Rapa and their journey to Rapa Nui remains. The western region of the Pacific Ocean between South America and Oceania encompasses, by itself, an area greater than the Atlantic Ocean; it is the greatest area of open sea in the world and it is the emptiest and most desolate region of the earth. In the middle lies tiny Easter Island, unique, and as insignificant as a pebble in the sea. Furthermore, the winds do not blow, as they do in France, from all directions: they blow always and unchangingly from one direction. For voyagers from Polynesia, such winds would always be blowing in the wrong direction. So, in their simple canoes, after who knows how many months of endless tacking back and forth, with what provisions, and guided by what inexplicable instincts, how and why did these mysterious navigators manage to reach this tiny grain of sand, lost in the vast immensities of the ocean.<sup>4</sup>

However, it is indisputable that the first settlers were Polynesian or Maori. The present islanders, whose complexions are paler than those of their ancestors because of the cloudy weather, have nonetheless retained their fine stature and handsome and characteristic faces, which are slightly elongated and oval in shape, with large eyes that are close together. The islanders have also retained many of the customs of their brothers who live far away. In particular, they speak the same language.

For me, the fact that the Maori language is spoken here is one of the unexpected charms of the island since I started to study it in books by missionaries, in preparation for our imminent arrival in the “Delicious Isle of Tahiti”, about



which I have dreamed since I was a child. And here, for the first time in my life, I can understand a few of those words that resonate in my ears in such a novel and melodiously wild manner.

Unlike this morning, this evening I shall not forget about the great statues. I ask Atamou about them after my siesta, speaking in his own language, since he is the first person to return to find me. "Take me, please, to the 'Sepulchers'." He understands me perfectly. I used the word "Sepulchers" (in Tahitian, *maraé*; and on Easter Island, *marae*) because these stone colossi, which are the reason for our visit to Easter Island, decorate the places where the great chiefs who fell in battle are buried under rocks that have been piled together to form *tumuli*. The natives also use the word *marae* [*moai*] for the thousand small fetishes and idols that ornament their reed huts and that are linked, for them, to memories of their dead.

So off we go, Atamou and I, just the two of us without any accompanying crowds, to visit the closest *marae*: my first excursion on this unknown island.

After walking for a short distance along the shore, we cross a plain that is covered with coarse grass of a type that I have never seen before, which is sadly faded and wilted.

On our way, we pass the ruins of a little house, similar to the one occupied by the Dane. Atamou tells me that it was the house of the "papa farani" (*père français* = french father, missionary) and stops me to tell me more about him. Atamou acts the entire story with extravagant gestures. The story is obviously very moving but I cannot quite understand all the details. I can tell, however, from Atamou's gestures that there were ambushes, men hidden behind rocks, gun shots and spear wounds...what did they do to this poor priest...? One never knows how violent a savage can become all of a sudden, even if he is usually sweet-tempered and kind, when he is impelled by some primitive passion or some shadowy superstition. One also should not forget that the cannibal instinct slumbers in the depths of the Polynesian soul, even though the Polynesians themselves appear so welcoming and have such a debonair appearance. Indeed, in Oceania, on the islands of Routouma and Hivaoa, the Maoris, who appear totally charming, sometimes eat you.

When he has finished telling his story, Atamou, who thinks that I have understood him perfectly, takes my hand and we set off again.

A little hill of brown stones rises up in front of us, resembling a gallic cromlech but made of much larger stones. On one side, the hill looks over the ocean, where no ships ever pass; on the other side it looks over a sad and deserted plain, which ends, in the distance, at the slopes of the craters of extinct volcanoes. Atamou confirms that this is a *marae* and the two of us clamber onto the pile of stones.

We are on a massive platform, which is half hidden by crude and irregularly carved fallen columns. I ask to see statues since I see none. Atamou replies with a wave of his hand, which indicates that I should look at my feet... I am perching on the chin of a statue, which, lying on its back, is looking fixedly at me from below with the two holes that serve as its eyes. It never occurred to me that the statues would be so large and so crudely carved. I am amazed that I could have missed the statue altogether. In fact, I can now see about a dozen statues, lying broken and in disarray: some final shud-

ders of the nearby volcanoes must, without a doubt, have toppled the statues. The noise of their weighty collapse must have been awesome. The face of each statue is carved with a child-like lack of skill; rudiments of arms and hands are barely indicated along the sides of the round body, such that each statue resembles a squat pillar. But they must have appeared as fearsome gods when they were standing, upright and enormous, facing the limitless and deserted ocean. Atamou tells me that there are other statues, further away on the island, many more, forming a tribe, supine and dead, along shores whitened by coral.

At the foot of the platform there is a small circular beach, surrounded by rocks, and we go down to the shore. The sea has crumbled corals of all types to make a snow-white sand, on which are scattered beautiful fragile seashells and slender branches of pink coral.

As the day progresses, the wind starts blowing as strongly as it did yesterday, bringing with it, from the southern seas, a bank of black clouds, which are so black that the mountains, the craters of extinct volcanoes, begin to shine brightly under the suddenly darkened sky. And Atamou, realizing that it is about to rain, hurries us home.

Indeed, half way back, we are caught in a brief shower, while the angry wind beats down the grasses over the entire plain. We take shelter under some rocks that form an overhang - in the middle of a swarm of red dragonflies. And where did they come from, these creatures also?

And the butterflies that we saw flying over the carpets of pale grass, white ones and yellow ones: who brought the eggs across eight hundred leagues of the Pacific Ocean...?

The flock of dark clouds move away rapidly, to continue their voyage across the deserted seas, after having shed a few drops of rain as they passed over this mysterious island. By the time we reach the bay where our frigate is moored, the evening sun is shining.

The region around the bay, where the reed huts are gathered, seems now to be astonishingly replete with life and joy since all the officers from the ship have come for a visit this afternoon and each is escorted by a group of natives. Now that it is time for the officers to return to the ship, they are waiting for the rowboats, sitting on the ground surrounded by the big primitive children who were their friends for the day and who sing to them as part of the festivities. I sit down with the officers and immediately my own friends come running up to squeeze in beside me, namely, Petero, Houga, Marie, and the lovely Iouaritaï. Alas, our visit of just a few hours has brought all kinds of ridiculousness and falsity to this land of stark desolation. Almost all of us have bartered, for fetishes or weapons, various old pieces of clothing, with which the men with tattooed chests have childishly bedecked themselves. And most of the women, either because they deem it appropriate or because they want to dress up, have put on cheap formless dresses of faded cotton, which the missionaries must have given their mothers and which have been lying unused beneath the thatch of their huts.

They sing, all the Maoris sing, clapping their hands as if in the rhythm of a dance. The women sing as sweetly and clearly as birds. The men sing in high, thin, trembling falsetto voices and then in deep cavernous tones, which sound like the roaring of angry savages. The music is made up of short sepa-

rated phrases, which they finish with lugubrious descending vocalizations, in a minor key. They sound as if they are expressing both how astonishing and how sad life is – and yet they are singing for joy, for the childlike joy of seeing us and for their appreciation of the amusing little novelties that we have brought them.

Their joy is the joy of just a single day. This joy, when we are far away tomorrow, will be replaced for the longest time by monotony and silence. These savage singers are prisoners on their treeless waterless island, they are a condemned race, even there in Polynesia among their maternal islands. They are part of a dwindling humanity and their unique destiny is to disappear.

While these islanders clap their hands and enjoy themselves, mingling with us with such familiarity, others are watching us in a state of pensive immobility. On the rocks that surrounded us like an amphitheater, facing the sea, another segment of the population, more fearful or less friendly, is arrayed; these are people whom we have not met. There are men with many tattoos, kneeling with their hands clasped on their knees; there are women sitting as still as statues, with pieces of white cloth on their shoulders and, around their hair, which is gathered up in the style of the ancients, they have crowns of reeds. Not a movement, not a sign, not a single noise: all they do is watch us, at a distance, from above. And as we sail away in our boats, the setting sun, already level with the sea, shines a red light on them through a break in the clouds, which have suddenly returned; the sun illuminates only this silent group and the rocks on which they are standing, which appear to glow in the darkness of the sky and the brown shadows of the craters.

In the evening, since I have to work tonight on board, I look over the documents on Easter Island that belong to the admiral. These documents date back to the time that the island was discovered by “civilized” man but, as I learn and not to my surprise, it is civilized man who has acted with ignoble savagery against the savages.

Around 1850, a group of Peruvian colonists had the idea of sending ships to the island on a slave raid. The Maoris defended themselves against the guns of their aggressors as best they could, with spears and stones. Obviously, they were defeated, with large numbers killed, and hundreds of them were cruelly captured and taken as slaves to Peru. After several years, the authorities in Lima arranged the repatriation of those who had not died of mistreatment or a broken heart. But when the exiles returned home, they brought smallpox with them and more than half the remaining population of the island died of this new scourge, against which the island’s sorcerers knew no remedy.

#### January 5

Today, once again, the captain allows one of my friends and me to take a rowboat, and we make our way back to the island just as day is breaking. As it did yesterday, the wind is blowing hard and straight in our faces, delaying our progress and soaking us from head to foot with spray. With some considerable difficulty, we reach the shore, having lost our way slightly among the coral reefs, among which the sea is rougher than ever and covered with white foam.

Atamou and our friends from yesterday run to the shore

to meet us, together with some islanders whose faces I don’t recognize. Trading with the latter, I make the early-morning purchase of a god made of wood with a sad and fearsome face and a headdress of black feathers.

This is my friend’s first visit to the island and, at his request, I take him first to see the ancient maraï, from which we are going to try to remove a statue later in the day. A large crowd of people follows us across the plain of wet grasses and, when we arrive at the maraï, they start to dance on the funerary stones and on the fallen idols. They dance all over the platform like a legion of wild things, with their hair in disarray and flying around in the wind. They are naked and coppery red, decorated with

blue tattoos, and their bodies are slender and bright against the dark stones and the black horizons. They dance and dance on the huge statues, stubbing their toes without complaint against the foreheads, noses and cheeks of the fallen statues. And I can hardly even hear what they are singing because of the constant intermingling of the howling gusts of wind and the noise of the waves...The men of Rapa Nui, who treat their little fetishes and little gods with such veneration, seem to have no respect at all for these tombs; they have no memories of those who are buried beneath them.<sup>6</sup>

We then return to the bay with the reed huts that I now know so well and I start to make visits in a less ceremonial manner than yesterday, with just a small entourage, that is to say accompanied only by my particular friends. I feel quite at home. The men that I meet limit their greetings to touching my hand or some other friendly gesture and then they continue on their way.

“Ia ora na, taio!” (Hello, friend), say the “chiefess” and her daughter, who are in a field digging up sweet potatoes. They greet me without interrupting their work. The old chief receives me in a cave adjacent to his hut, where he spends his life kneeling, with his hands clasped on his blue-tattooed knees. With his face and its dark blue stripes, his long hair, his long teeth and his animal-like pose, he might appear rather frightening were it not for the extreme sweetness of his expression. I no longer seem to interest him much and I don’t stay more than a few minutes.

I want to obtain one of the meter-wide headdresses made of black feathers that I have seen worn by some of the elders. But these men are difficult to approach and I explain what I want to Houga. He is the one who best understands my halting phrases and we start our search together. He brings me to several huts, in which ancients with blue faces and white teeth are kneeling, as motionless as mummies. Initially,



Wood figure with feathers, from S. Chauvet, 1934, Figure 139.

they don't even seem to notice my presence and one of them is busy pulling teeth out of a human skull to give new shiny eyes to his idol. In this particular hut there are, indeed, some very large feather headdresses, attached below the roof, but the old man wants an insanely high price for them: my white trousers and my cadet's jacket with its gold trim, that is to say, my new jacket since I sold my other one yesterday. It's too much. I have to abandon my quest. When Houga sees how disappointed I am, he proposes to fix up, by this evening, a head-dress that is slightly shabby and worn that he has in his own hut. He offers to give it to me in exchange for just a pair of trousers – and I accept.

Now we set off to visit the old Danish Robinson Crusoe, keeping a promise that we made yesterday. The outside of the Dane's little house, by itself, is enough to break one's heart, with its makeshift verandah, and something resembling a little garden, in which grow a few skinny plants whose seeds he must have brought with him.... It is hard to imagine the isolation of such a man who doesn't even have a view, on this desert-like island, of a clump of trees or even a little greenery on which to rest his eyes. And if he has an emergency, if he falls sick or if he is on the brink of death, it is impossible for him to communicate with the rest of the world....

He left at dawn to hunt rabbits, he tells us with great courtesy, as he invites us into his home. His common-law wife is a Maori who is no longer young and who looks somewhat faded. She is, of course, the most elegant lady on the island. This morning she is wearing a yellow muslin tunic, with a traveling blanket of red wool that she has thrown like a shawl around her shoulders. She offers us fresh cold water from a clay jug – a rare gift since there are no springs on Rapa Nui. The natives collect water when it rains and store it in gourds, where it rapidly becomes undrinkable, or they fetch water from the ponds inside the volcanic craters but these ponds often dry up. So much misery and so much sadness on this lonely island! And to think that it would be impossible for this man to get himself something different, even if he wanted it, because there is NOTHING anywhere.

Elsewhere, hermits or those who have chosen a reclusive life can always, if they have a problem, return to civilization or call for help. But the Dane.... It sends shivers down my spine to imagine how he must feel on rainy evenings, when dusk falls in stormy weather, and during the long darkness of winter nights. We do not want to exploit the hospitality of our hostess, in particular since things might turn out

badly for one or both of us, and, when it is lunchtime for our oarsmen (ten o'clock), we return to our frigate. On board, the men have been working since early morning on preparations to remove a statue from the island since the admiral has de-

ecided that we should do this today if possible and then leave for Oceania.

At midday, a team is ready to go and remove one of the great idols. The frigate's sloop is loaded with huge wooden levers, a kind of improvised cart

and one hundred volunteers, under the command of a lieutenant from the ship. But it is my turn to work on board so, alas, all I can do is watch sadly as the expedition sets off for the shore.

However, at the very last minute, the admiral, whom I serve as senior cadet, calls me onto the bridge. He has decided to postpone my guard duty until tomorrow on condition that I bring him a detailed sketch of the marae, made before it is disturbed by our activities. I am amazed that my talent for sketching should have turned out to be so useful on this trip and that, as a result, I have been given permission to go and have fun! I jump joyfully into the sloop, which is already packed with sailors, who are as excited as if we are all going to a party.

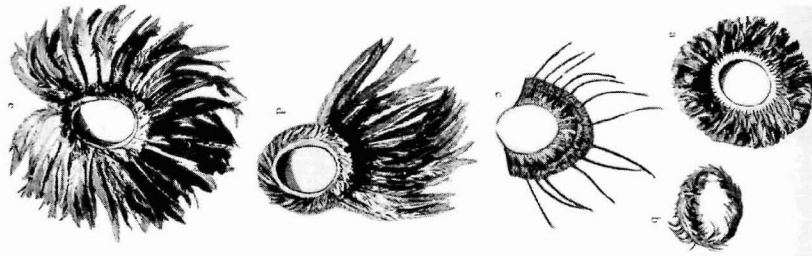
With its heavy cargo, the sloop has problems crossing the reefs that separate the ship from a bay that is closer to the marae than the bay where we first disembarked. We reach the shore, nonetheless, but it is clear that we might have difficulties returning to the ship when our load is increased by the weight of an idol. Obviously, two trips will be required to bring all the sailors back to the ship.

The natives have gathered in a big crowd on the beach and welcome us with piercing cries. Since yesterday, the news that we plan to take a statue has spread and the

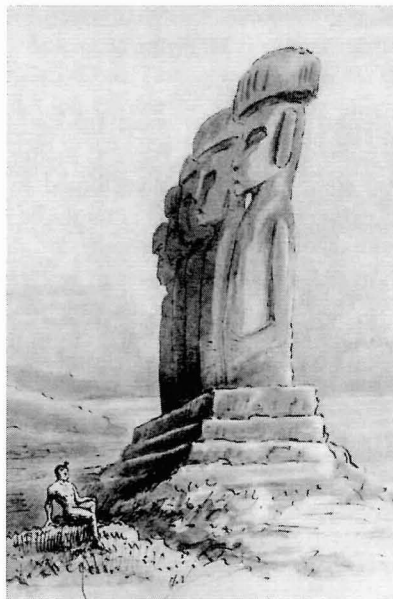
islanders have all assembled to watch the proceedings. Even natives who live on La Pérouse Bay, on the other side of the island, have come to watch and so we see many new faces.

The ship's lieutenant in charge of the sailors insists that the hundred men march up to the marae in formation. As the bugles sound, the crowd becomes ecstatic: they have never heard anything that resembles such music. It is difficult to maintain order among the sailors since they are surrounded by half-naked women who are having fun dancing and cavorting around them.

At the marae, it is no longer possible to maintain any kind of discipline. There is wild confusion of sailors' jerseys and tattooed flesh as the sailors and natives interact in a riotous frenzy. Everyone is brushing against and shoving every-



Examples of feathered headdresses. From S. Chauvet 1934, Figure 10.



Drawing of an *ahu* by Pierre Loti. From S. Chauvet 1934, Figure 37.



one else, dancing, shouting, and singing. After an hour, everything on the platform has been knocked about by the tools and the levers that we brought with us. The statues are even more damaged and chipped than they were yesterday, and it is hard to know which one to choose.

One statue, which appears to be lighter and less badly damaged than the others, is lying with its head down and its nose in the dirt. In order to see its face, we shall have to turn it over. The levers, maneuvered with loud shouts, succeed in pivoting the statue around its axis and the statue rotates onto its back with a loud thud. The sight of the statue rolling over and falling down again causes the natives to dance even faster and more furiously, with an even louder clamor of voices. Twenty savages jump onto the statue's belly and dance like madmen.... The bodies of their distant ancestors, sleeping under the piled-up stones, have never heard such a commotion, except perhaps when the statues themselves keeled over, all shaken simultaneously by some kind of earthquake, or when, as a result of old age, the statues fell headfirst, one by one, onto the grass.

It is decided that we shall take the statue that has been turned over. However, we shall not take its entire body, only its head. The head, by itself, is huge, weighing four or five tons. The job of sawing off the head begins. Luckily for us, the statue is made of a kind of volcanic rock that is rather friable and the saws slice through it easily, although they do make a dreadful grinding noise.<sup>7</sup>

When, amid all the clamor, I finish my sketch for the admiral, I leave the scene. The final detachment of the head from the body of the statue and loading of the severed head on the sloop don't interest me. With my faithful friends Atamou, Petero, Marie and Iouaritaï, I return to the bay where the huts are located to see the progress of repairs on the crown of feathers that Houga has promised to finish by this very evening.

Indeed, I find this fine little savage hard at work, as I had hoped. He has cut the tail off a black cock to replace the worn-out feathers and, as he works, the crown starts to look very impressive.

While I am walking past the cave of the old chief, he beckons to me with an engaging and confidential air. He shows me some black dust in a pouch of dead leaves, which

he refers as "tattoo". It is the material with which the natives color their tattoos and, since I have shown such an interest in the islanders' crafts, he offers to tattoo my legs lightly with a few designs – in exchange for my trousers, which I would give him for his trouble.

Another old man also takes me to his home to exchange a pair of earrings made of the backbone of a shark for a box of Swedish matches. This evening, once again, I shall return to the ship with a thousand amazing things.

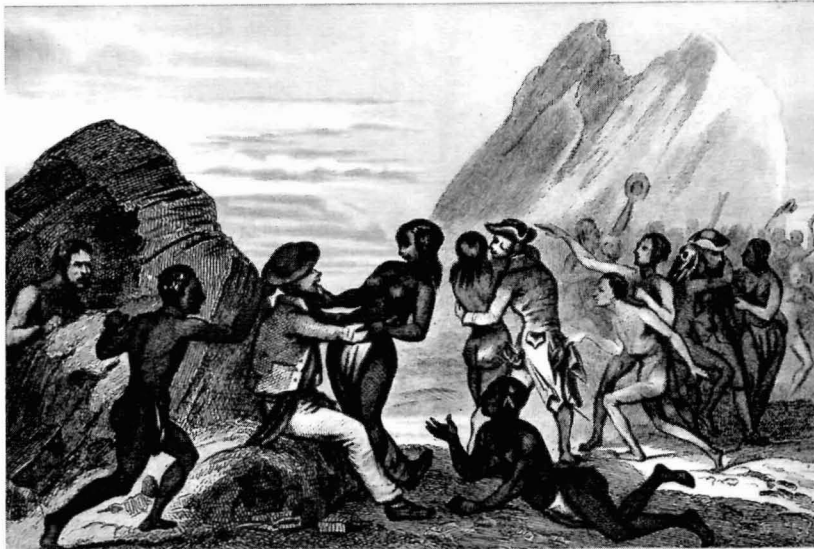
The bay that we have chosen as our base is dominated by the Rano Kaou crater, which is perhaps the widest and the most perfectly circular crater in the world.<sup>8</sup>

When the sun has almost reached the horizon, I sit once again with my five friends, facing the sea, at the place where we have become accustomed to wait together for the arrival of the canoes. This might be the last time we do this since I can see, in the distance, the sloop returning to the ship and, in the center of a mass of sailors in white, the large brown head of the idol that is leaving the island with them. Thus, the expedition has turned out as planned and we are likely to leave tomorrow. I almost say out loud, "That's too bad; I would have liked to stay longer"

In the evening, however, just as I am getting into my hammock, the captain calls for me and I have a premonition that something new is planned for the following day. Indeed, the captain tells me that our departure has been postponed for twenty four hours. He plans to make a trip tomorrow, with some of the officers, to the farthest region of the island, where there are statues that are quite different from the ones that we have seen and that are still standing. The trip will probably be difficult and long. On the map, which we study together, the distance to be covered is about six leagues as the crow flies. With detours and hilly country, that will be more like seven or eight, and then we have to come back again.... And then he asks me if I would like to go with him. Of course, I'm

dying to go. But, tomorrow, alas, I am on guard duty as a result of having taken today off.

"I'll take care of that with the admiral," he says, and then, laughing, he adds, "On one condition...." Oh yes, he wants some drawings. He wants me to draw the statues from



Drawing from La Pérouse, *Trip round the World*, showing the local women cavorting with sailors. From S. Chauvet 1934, Figure 16.



The statue head now in Musée de l'Homme in Paris. Photo from S. Chauvet 1934, Figure 40.

all angles and for everyone to see.... I'll do as many as he wants just so long as he'll take me with him!<sup>9</sup>

#### January 6

It is not yet four in the morning and it is still pitch dark when we leave the ship under thick clouds. We reach the shore before daybreak, choosing a difficult and isolated spot in order not to wake the natives, who would all want to come with us. There are five of us: the staff captain, the captain, two officers, and myself, plus the old Dane and a Maori that he has brought with him serve as our guide. Three sailors follow us, carrying our lunch and theirs on their shoulders. Over by the reed huts, we can see fires through the grass.

First we pass the marae that was wrecked yesterday; today it looks quite sinister. The sky is completely covered, apart from a break in the clouds on the eastern horizon, through which a yellow glow announces the dawn.

We walk in single file through the wet grass towards the interior of the island, which we have to cross from one end to the other. After half an hour, the sea and the distant lights of the frigate disappear from sight behind the slope of a hill, which makes us feel even more isolated than before. We reach the central region of the island. This part of the captain's map of the island is covered with the word "Tekauhangoaru", written in large letters in the handwriting of the Bishop of Tahiti. Tekauhangoaru is the first of the names that the Polynesians gave to the island. More even than the name Rapa Nui, the name echoes with the sounds of a sad wilderness surrounded by wind and shadows.

Even at those times when the population of the island was large, it appears that the interior of the island remained uninhabited. The same is true of other islands settled by the Maoris, who are a race of fishermen and sailors whose lives are focused on the sea. Thus, the center of Tahiti and that of Nuka Hiva, even though they are covered with lush vegetation and forests full of flowers, have never been anything but silent and deserted. But there are no forests here on Rapa Nui, no trees, nothing, just denuded and funereal downs, with innumerable little pyramids of stones planted everywhere – like cemeteries that go on for ever.

The sun rises but the sky remains very dark; it starts to drizzle and we seem to be moving forward but making no progress. The horizon is enclosed on all sides by one crater after another, all of which look identical, with the same truncated-cone shape and colored the same shade of brown.

We are up to our knees in wet grass. This grass never varies and covers the entire island. It is some kind of crude grayish green plant with woody stems ornamented with tiny violet flowers. The plants are surrounded by thousands of the tiny bugs that, in France, are called "ephemerals" [mayflies]. The pyramids that we continue to pass at every step are made of unworked stones, which have simply been piled on top of one another. Time has colored them black and they seem to have been here for centuries.

Now we enter a valley where the vegetation changes slightly. There are ferns and wild sugar cane, some skinny mimosa bushes, and a few other low shrubs, which the officers recognize as being common all over Oceania, even though, on other islands, they grow into trees. Did people bring them here or have they been here since the mysterious

early times? And why have they remained stunted here, restricted to this one spot, instead of developing as they do elsewhere and invading other parts of the island.

Finally, at about half past nine, having crossed the island at its widest, we see the blue waters of the Pacific Ocean once again, stretched out in front of us. And the rain stops, the clouds break up and the sun comes out. It seems as if we have emerged from Tekauhangoaru as one would awake from a nightmare of rain and dark shadows.

In the distance, near the shore, we see something that looks like a little European house. As our Danish friend tells us, it is the third house that the missionaries built some time ago. In this region, which is called Vaihou, there used to be a happy tribe of natives who lived by the shore at that time. But nobody lives here now. Vaihou is deserted and the little house is in ruins.

We can already catch a glimpse of Ranoraraku, at the foot of which we shall, apparently, find statues that are different from all the others, stranger and still standing upright. We are only about two leagues away from our destination. Therefore, we stop here, at the empty house, for lunch both because that will take the weight off our sailors' shoulders and because we shall have at least part of a roof to give us some shade.

A very old and exceedingly ugly native woman shows her face at the door and then approaches us with timid smiles. She is the only living being that we meet on our journey. She has made this lonely little ruin into her home and, without a doubt, she must be the daughter of some vanished tribe. But what could she live on and what could she possibly find to eat? Roots, probably, lichens, and any fish that she can catch.

Beyond Vaihou, we cross an area that is rutted with footpaths that are so clearly visible and well-trodden that one would think that vast crowds pass this way every day. And yet there is not a soul anywhere. We have been told that the place is deserted and we can see that, indeed, it is. Our native guide tells us that, apart from the old woman, there is nobody within five leagues in any direction. It is hard to know what to make of his statement.... On this island, everything raises disquieting questions.

The place that we are heading towards must have been, in the dark nights of the past, some kind of religious center, temple or necropolis, but now it is in ruins. All around are the bases of cyclopean statues, the remains of thick walls, the debris from giant construction projects. And the grass, which is getting taller and taller, hides traces of mysterious earlier times. The grass has woody stems that resemble those of broom – always the same kind of grass and always the same faded green.

Now we are walking along the shore. Beside the beaches, on the cliffs, there are terraces made of immense stones. People must have climbed onto these terraces via ramps similar to those of ancient Hindu pagodas. The terraces were the sites of huge idols, which have tumbled down head-first, burying their faces in the rubble. These idols would have represented spirits of the type worshipped by other Polynesians, such as the Spirit of the Sands and the Spirit of the Rocks, the two guardians that protect islands against the onslaught of the sea.<sup>10</sup>

It was here, in the midst of these ruins, that the missionaries discovered a number of small wooden tablets, carved

with hieroglyphics. The Bishop of Tahiti owns them today and, without a doubt, they will provide a key to the enigma of Rapa Nui if someone ever manages to translate them.

We pass more and more gods as we get closer and closer to Ranoraku, and they get bigger and bigger too. We measure some of them and they are ten and even eleven meters tall, each one carved in one piece. There are statues scattered all over the place, not only at the base of terraces. Wherever we look, we see the tops of these massive brown statues above the tall grass. Their headdresses, which were a kind of turban, were made of a different type of blood-red lava and they must have rolled all over the place when the statues fell over. They look like giant millstones.

Near one tumulus, there is a pile of charred skulls and jawbones, which seem to provide evidence of human sacrifices that might have taken place at this site for some long period of time. And – yet another mystery – there are paved roads here, just like Roman roads, that descend to the shore and disappear into the Ocean...!

There are not only skulls and jawbones but bones of all types everywhere around here. You cannot dislodge a clump of dirt without disturbing some human remains, and it seems as if this part of the island might once have been a vast ossuary.

There was a terrible time, in the past, that is still spoken of with awe by the old people of today. There were too many islanders on Rapa Nui and many of them starved to death on this island that nobody was able to leave. As a result, great wars erupted among the tribes, with wholesale massacres and cannibalism. All this happened at a time when the white man did not even suspect the existence of Oceania. However, in the last century, when Vancouver landed on the island, on which there were barely more than two thousand inhabitants, he was still able to see traces of armed camps on all the mountains and remains of fortification barriers on the slopes of all the craters.

The large numbers of carved blocks, which have been transported and assembled into platforms, attest to the presence, for centuries, of a powerful race that was skilled in working with stone – but it is impossible to explain how they achieved what they did. Almost all peoples passed initially through a megalithic stage, during which they had at their disposal forces of which we are totally ignorant.<sup>11</sup>

Scientists say, it is true, that the statues are made of trachytic rock, which is hard and resists wear. This might be true of the great statues at Ranoraku but it cannot be true of the statues that are scattered along the shore, which I have

seen cut up easily with a wood saw and which are made of a light and friable material.

I should note that the island seems very small in proportion to the considerable area that is occupied by monuments and idols. Could this have been a sacred island, to which people came from afar for religious ceremonies during the ancient times of great Polynesian splendor, when the kings of the archipelagos still had war canoes that were capable of confronting great storms on the open seas? Could these kings have come, from all over the Pacific Ocean, to gather in council in the caves here, speaking a secret language...? Or is this island the last remnant of a continent that was submerged long ago, like Atlantis? The roads that disappear into

the ocean suggest that this hypothesis might be true but Maori legends make no mention of such a place. Moreover, when Atlantis disappeared, it formed giant plateaus under the sea, while the shores of Easter Island descend immediately to immeasurable depths....

As we march in single file, endlessly, along the narrow paths of the natives, through the high grass and amidst so much desolation, silence and mystery, we are overtaken by fatigue and a sense of disquiet. Moreover, the statues lying on the ground everywhere are in all respects similar to the ones that we have already seen; they differ only insofar as they are slightly bigger but their shapes and faces are the same.

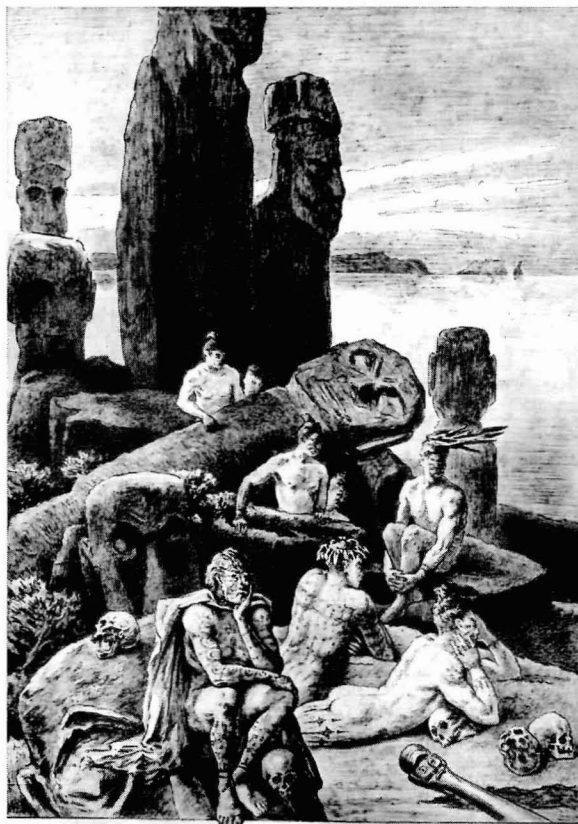
We ask our guide where the “other” statues are that we have come so far to see, the other statues that are supposed to be different from the ones we’ve seen, that are supposed still to be standing upright....

“You’ll see them soon,” he says, “Over there on the slopes of Ra-

noraku. There is a unique group of statues there and you won’t find statues like them anywhere else.”

Moreover, the footpaths now abandon the shore and turn towards the interior of the island, in the direction of the volcano.

We have been walking for about an hour and a half since we stopped at Vaihou when we start to glimpse, on the slopes of the mountain, giant statues that cast huge shadows on the sad grass. They are not arranged in any particular pattern and most are looking in our direction as if to see who is coming towards them. We also see some extended profiles, with pointed noses, that are facing in other directions. These are the statues that we want to see – they really are. Our efforts have not been in vain and involuntarily, as we approach them, we lower our voices.



Drawing of an Easter Island scene, by Pierre Loti, January 7, 1872. From S. Chauvet 1934, Figure 13.



These statues are, indeed, quite different from the large numbers of statues that were lying down, asleep, all along our route. Even though they seem to have come from an earlier time, they are the work of less childlike craftsmen, who were able to carve expressions on their faces, and their faces are frightening. In addition, they have no bodies; they are only colossal heads, emerging out of the ground at the end of long necks. They appear to be gazing into the still and silent distance. What members of what human race do their features represent, with the upward tilt of the ends of their noses and their thin lips, which are fixed in a pout of disdain or mockery? Each has no eyes, only deep cavities beneath its forehead, under a vast and noble brow – and yet the statues seem to be looking and thinking. There is a furrow on the side of each cheek, which might represent some kind of coiffure, as in the case of the Sphinx, or ears that are set back and flattened. The statues vary in height from five to eight meters. Some of them have necklaces, made of fragments of embedded flint [sic], or furrows representing tattoos.

Clearly, these statues are not the work of the Maoris. According to the traditions of the old folk, these statues were on the island before the arrival of their ancestors. The emigrants from Polynesia, upon landing after their long voyages a thousand or so years ago, would have found an island that had been deserted for the longest time, guarded only by these monstrously large heads. What race of men, which has disappeared without leaving any other mementos in human history, might have lived here long ago, and how did this race die out?

And who will ever be able to tell us the age of these divinities...? With their thick incrustations of lichen, they seem to have the patina of uncountable centuries, just like Celtic menhirs.<sup>12</sup> Some statues have fallen over and some are broken. Others, as a result of time and movement of the subsoil, have become buried up to their nostrils and seem to be sniffing the ground.

The midday sun flames above the statues, a tropical sun that exaggerates their harsh expressions by making their eye sockets darker under their overhanging brows, and the slope of the crater elongates the shadows that fall on the cemetery grass. In the sky, the few last remaining wisps of clouds are dissolving on a stunningly magnificent blue background. The wind has died down and all is quiet around these ancient statues. However, when the winds no longer blow, what will trouble the funereal peace of this place? Who will disturb its grassy shroud? Nobody ever comes here and there is not one single beast, not one single bird and not one single snake on the island. The only wild creatures are the yellow butterflies and the flies that buzz so quietly.

We are half way up the mountain, here, in the midst of the smiles of these huge stone faces. Above our heads is the

edge of the crater of the extinct volcano; below us is the deserted plain, with scattered ruins and fallen statues, and, in the distance is the infinity of the ocean, on which a ship is almost never ever seen. But I must be quick and, as I have promised, I have to sketch these lonely figures, these groups of statues standing motionless in the sun, while my companions snooze in the grass. I draw hastily, hurrying to record every detail, even though I am tired and have to fight a fearsome desire to sleep. I want to make drawings so that I can remember every particularity and all the strangeness of what is being imprinted on my memory.

And just as I finish, it's time to leave. The captain is worried, as are we all, about the long journey that we must make, before nightfall, across the deserted center of the island. So we must go, certain that we shall never again return to see these gods in their extraordinary domain.

At about two o'clock, at the hottest hour of the day, with the sun shining uninterruptedly right in our eyes, we set off again in single file along the narrow paths whose existence we cannot explain, with the same

grass all around us at all times, sometimes up to our knees and sometimes as high as our belts.

And, in spite of the morning's downpours, the grass isn't even damp and neither is the ground. How can this land dry out so rapidly, with the earth turning to dust within several hours of rain, in the middle of the vast waters of the ocean that surrounds it....? And also, it's odd, when you think about it, that this island continues to exist so serenely, in the middle of the Pacific Ocean which, you might say, only wets its coral shores without ever wanting to cross some agreed-upon line.... It wouldn't take much of a disturbance in the awesome masses of water in the ocean to submerge this little nothing of an island on which, for so many years, the sun has warmed its stone inhabitants... And, as I become more and more tired, I begin to get the feeling that, little by little, the soul of the ancients of Rapa Nui is penetrating my soul, as I contemplate the circular horizon of the sovereign sea. I start to share their fears in the face of the vastness of the waters and, suddenly, I can understand why it was that they accumulated, on the shores of their isolated isle, giant representations of the Spirit of the Sands and the Spirit of the Rocks. These guardians would tame the terrible powers of the great blue seas under an unmoving stare.

At dusk, we are back in the inhabited part of the island, with the frigate at anchor in front of us. The men on the bridge have been waiting for us, watching the shore with their telescopes, and a boat leaves the ship immediately to bring us back. I have barely time to sit, one last time, and watch the sea with my five savage friends, as darkness falls. We sit together, waiting for the boat that will take me away for ever. They seem quite upset at my departure, under the clouds that the



The outer slope of Rano Raraku. From a sketch by Routledge 1919, Figure. 47.

evening winds have brought back, and they tell me sadly many things that I wish I could understand better. I too feel the pain of saying goodbye forever – there is no question that it is forever: we are due to sail at six o'clock tomorrow morning and, for sure, I shall never return.

In the evening, on board, I hold in my hands, for the first time, one of the inscribed wooden tablets from Rapa Nui. It is one of the "pieces of wood that talk", in the words of the Maoris, and it belongs to the captain, who has lent it to me. It is shaped like an elongated square with rounded corners. It seems to have been polished in some crude manner, probably by rubbing with a piece of flint. The wood, brought from who knows where, is extremely old and dried out.

Oh! What a troubling and mysterious little piece of wood this is, whose secrets will be forever impenetrable! There are carved characters, in rows; they resemble Egyptian hieroglyphics, representing men, animals, and inanimate objects. There are people who are recognizably sitting or standing, fishes, tortoises and spears. The characters eternalize the sacred language of the great chiefs, which other men cannot understand and which they spoke during their councils in the caves. The characters had esoteric meanings; they represented deep and secret things, which only the kings or the initiated priests could understand.<sup>13</sup>

This writing, engraved like the furrows of a field (according to the missionary bishop), is read from bottom to top and, every time one moves from one line to the next, one has to turn the tablet upside down since every character is written upside down relative to the orientation of the characters on the lines immediately above and below it.

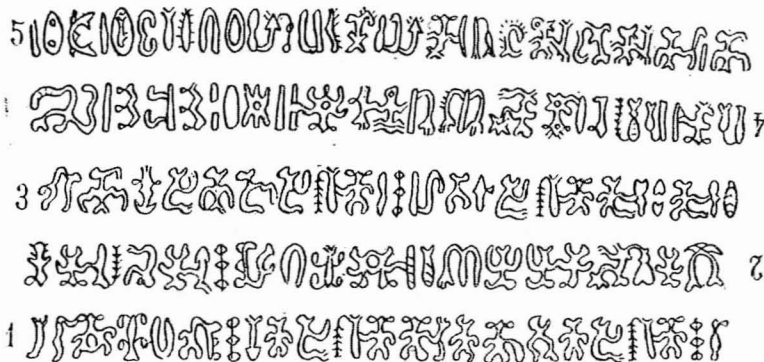
Unfortunately, the "esoteric" meaning of the words, the only meaning that is really important, could not be determined and the language on the tablets remains unintelligible for ever.

Someone is calling me.... Someone from the admiral's staff. This evening, just as I did yesterday and just as I did the day before, when I was called unexpectedly, I sense some new design that might take me once more to the dark island.

Indeed, the admiral would like a stone figure of a god, of particular dimensions and with particular features. And, as he knows that his senior cadet has been in many of the islanders' dwellings, he asks if I can arrange to get such a figure for him. He wants to know, too, if I can do it expedi-

tiously, at dawn tomorrow morning, without delaying the departure of the frigate, which is set for six o'clock in the morning.

In fact, I do recall an idol that meets all his specifications, in the hut of the old chief himself. I agree to bring it back for the admiral before we cast off, in exchange for a greatcoat that he will give me. Then, delighted with the chance to return once more to Rapa Nui, I go over in my mind, before I go to sleep, many phrases in Polynesian for one last supreme conversation with my savage friends.



"Ecriture de L'ile de Paques". Drawing after one of the tables from Msgr. Jaussen, SS.-CC. The lines of glyphs are in boustrophedon, that is to say, they turn in the fashion of plowing a field, right to left; left to right without break.

#### January 7

At four o'clock in the morning, I am on my way in the admiral's whaling boat. By chance, the air is calm but the sky is so cloudy, so black! It has been the same every day since our arrival: thick and unbroken clouds delay the arrival of daylight on the island and over the sea.

And here I am, once more, in the half light of the morning, in the midst of the breakers and the reef, returning to the bay that I thought I would never see again. The nocturnal view of the shore is as fantastic today as it was on the morning of my first visit. There are heavy shadows in the valleys on the old extinct volcanoes, while the coastline is already vaguely visible. Here and there, among the rocks and the huts that are barely distinguishable, fires are burning in the grass, with dancing yellow flames and, as they pass in front of the fires, one can see the outlines of a few of the women; they are wandering around, watching roots or yams cooking in the fire. As we get closer, we can smell the smoke and wild, animal-like odors. And these naked shapes, this primitive behavior, revealed by the glow of the fires, makes me dream of ancient times. In prehistoric times, in colder climes, the light of dawn must similarly have lit up the awakening of a Stone Age tribe and their preparations for the day....

The women obviously get up earlier than the men here because I am met first by Marie and Iouaritaï. They didn't think that they would ever see me or any of us again. There are great cries of joy. Someone runs to the old chief's

hut to tell him that I want to see him and that I am in a hurry. He comes out of his hut. He agrees to my offer. In exchange for his stone idol, which two of my sailors carry off with their hands linked to form a chair, I give him the admiral's beautiful greatcoat and he puts it on right away.



An Easter Island carving. From S. Chauvet 1934, Figure 61.

There is no time to lose. We have to go back down to the shore. In a few seconds, all my friends arrive to see me once more. Houga, who has been woken in a hurry, appears wrapped in a mantle of tree bark. Then I hear Atamou run up behind me and finally Petero, that skinny lunatic. These really are our last farewells this time. In a few hours, Easter Island will have disappeared from my view forever. And, truly, we have become friends of a sort, perhaps as a result of the deep differences between us or perhaps because of a common childishness.

It is almost daylight when I return to the whaling boat with the stone idol. My five friends remain on the shore, to watch me as I disappear from view. Only the old chief, who came down to the shore to see me off, is returning slowly to his hut. And, seeing him looking so ridiculous and pathetic in his admiral's greatcoat with his long naked tattooed legs sticking out beneath it, I feel that I might not have shown him sufficient respect, when I made our bargain, and that I might have treated him with much less than the dignity that he deserved.<sup>14</sup>

**Endnotes** [The Author's original notes are in bold; those in italics are by the translator]

- <sup>1</sup> *One league equals approximately four kilometers.*
- <sup>2</sup> *The preceding paragraph is based on a play on words. The word "Nui" in Rapa Nui and the French word for night "nuit" are pronounced similarly.*
- <sup>3</sup> *The Dane was Christian Schmidt, a carpenter who worked for Dutron-Bornier. Schmidt was the ancestor of a large Rapanui family, the Tuki.*
- <sup>4</sup> **According to the traditions of the Maoris and their genealogies, the first settlers reached the island only about a thousand years ago. Editors' note: from this point on, Loti refers to the Easter Islanders as "maori".**
- <sup>5</sup> *"bois de fer", which translates as "Brazilian ironwood" or *Caesalpinia ferrea*.*
- <sup>6</sup> **It is generally accepted that the statues on Easter Island were not carved by the Maoris but were carved by an earlier race of people that is now extinct. This might be true for the great statues at Ranoraraku, about which I shall speak later. But the countless statues that, long ago, graced the marae along the shore do belong to the Maoris and represent, quite probably, the Spirit of the Sands and the Spirit of the Rocks.**
- <sup>7</sup> *The statue head is now in the foyer of the Musée de l'Homme in Paris. It may have come from Ahu o Rongo, located on the shoreline at Hanga Roa. Métraux (1970:46) states that the site was called ahu Ana Koiroroa, a name that is no longer recognized. As "ana" means cave, there likely was some misunderstanding on the part of Métraux.*
- <sup>8</sup> **On Easter Island, the names of all the craters begin with "Rano", which actually means "pond". The reason for this designation is that the interior of each of the craters has become a swamp, from which the natives collect water after heavy rains. However, the choice of the term "Rano" implies that the Maoris who first took possession of the island must have found the water-filled craters of volcanoes that were already extinct. This conclusion tends, moreover, to disprove the**

**generally accepted theory that the island must have been shaken up and "diminished" as a result of fiery eruptions that occurred after the island had been settled by the Maoris.**

- <sup>9</sup> *All this is happening in 1872. Cameras and the stereopticon have not yet been invented.*
- <sup>10</sup> **Tii-Onē and Tii-Papa, the Spirit of the Sands and the Spirit of the Rocks, are names that come from the old chiefs on the island of Laivavai (Toubouai Archipelago, Polynesia), who explained what they mean. On Laivavai, there are statues with the same features as those of the statues on Rapa Nui, but the former are not as high and in better condition than the latter. (Loti is referring to the archipelago of Tubuai, and Raivavae island which has large monolithic statues).**
- <sup>11</sup> **In the case of the Maoris, it would seem that the "Age of Great Stones" continued into modern times since the volcanic lava of which some of their statues are made is not very durable; the idols by the shore could not be more than three or four hundred years old.**
- <sup>12</sup> *Standing stones in Brittany and elsewhere.*
- <sup>13</sup> **Monsignor d'Axiéri, the missionary bishop who lived for many years in Polynesia, has a great many of these tablets and he recorded the literal meaning of each character, as it was told to him by some old chiefs from Easter Island, who are now dead. A glimpse is provided below of the documentation that he left, which is quite unique.**
- <sup>14</sup> *The last sentence can also end as follows: "... and that I might have been guilty of treating him with lèse-sauvagerie", where the term "lèse-sauvagerie" is used by Loti in analogy to "lèse-majesté", which is untranslatable to the extent that it is often used even in English sentences.*



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